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ABSTRACT

A continuing problem confronting businesses is the number of college graduates unprepared to write on the job because their communication abilities are meager and their knowledge of the many kinds of writing they must do in the workplace is incomplete. Causes of the gap between college writing instruction and the writing demands in the workplace may be due to the academic institution (including teaching writing before students are sufficiently mature and teaching with models inappropriate for business writing), the writing instructor (including emphasis on product rather than the process and little expertise in writing instruction), and the students (including seeking simplistic writing formulas, low motivation, and lack of vision beyond college). Several schools have responded to the plea for better and more appropriate writing instruction. Among the features of the more successful programs are required writing courses across the curriculum, writing internships with real businesses, the use of consultants to improve content faculty writing and to emphasize the importance of good writing on the job, and limiting enrollment in writing courses with emphasis on collaborative learning and peer evaluation. Activities organized by the Conference on College Composition and Communication (CCCC) of the National Council of Teachers of English to focus national attention on the aims of business and college writing communities include scheduling "real life" workshops that bring business and academic people together, fostering consulting activities, and devoting more CCCC sessions and publications to the work of the professional writing consultant. (EL)

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Think Tank Synthesis: Bridging the Gap Between College Writing Courses and Real World Writing

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A continuing problem confronts the national business sector. Many college graduates begin their careers unprepared to write on the job, both in that their communication abilities are meager and in that their knowledge of the many kinds of writing they must do is incomplete. What's more, some continue to write poorly for much of their careers, in the absence of proper writing models or intensive business writing courses, and often pass their worst habits on to subordinates, continuing the cycle. Leaders of industry recognize the self-generating problem, but have had little success in defining its specific causes and finding remedies for them. At the center of the problem are the questions: What should the university be teaching to prepare students for career writing? How fully can these students be prepared prior to graduation?

Causes Attributable to University Instruction in Writing

Causes of the gap between college writing instruction and the writing demands in the workplace may be traced to the academic institution, the writing instructor, and the student.

First, colleges and universities:

1. Try to teach this complex art before students are mature enough to learn and appreciate it fully.

2. Promote the false impression that writing constitutes a set of skills to be learned in two semesters of freshman composition.

3. Encourage students to compete for grades and class standing rather than cooperate with one another to enhance learning and achievement.

4. Require students to write for the academic community, imposing models inappropriate for business and industry.

Second, instructors:

1. Emphasize writing products rather than the process, curtailing the essential thinking and reflection that contribute to good writing.

2. Are often literature or humanities professors whose chief expertise and concerns have little to do with teaching writing; thus, they do not want to teach writing.

3. Attempt to perfect one fixed document style (i.e., the research paper) rather than applying writing principles to a number of communication environments.

4. Know little of the demands of the commercial writing environment: time pressures, accepted documents, modes of composing and problem solving, etc.

5. Often do not take student writing seriously enough to ponder and question the writing motives and practices that shape the final product.

6. Do not provide realistic incentives for writing -- real problems to solve, living audiences, etc.

Third, students:

1. Seek formulas ("recipes") by which to write -- step-by-step procedures that will not further complicate their thinking or their lives.

2. Lack motivation in that they see little relevance of their composition studies to their pragmatic, success-oriented goals.

3. Lack the patience and maturity of thinking that are required by most writing situations in business.

4. Do not realize that the university is but one entity that teaches writing, and that they ought to continue to learn to write after they graduate.

5. Are wary of teaching that encourages them to break from the tradition of their profession; they are more concerned with following role models (doctors, lawyers, managers) than with creating better models to follow.

Solutions in the University

Several schools have responded to the plea for better and more appropriate writing instruction. The more successful programs feature:

1. Returning students to required writing courses throughout their college careers and emphasizing more writing across the curriculum.

2. Providing actual writing internships away from campus to place students under real writing demands and make them responsible to real and varied audiences.

3. Bringing in consultants on two levels: composition faculty to other departments, to advise professors on how to improve their own writing and how to create and grade writing assignments; and business people to writing faculty and classrooms, to stress the importance of efficient writing on the job and to clarify the kinds of writing that need to be emphasized.

4. Limiting enrollment in writing-emphasis courses and focusing on collaborative learning and peer evaluation.

Solutions through CCCC

Activities organized through CCCC/NCTE can focus national attention on bringing the aims of business and college writing communities closer together. Specific actions to bridge the current educational gaps include:

1. Scheduling "real life" workshops, bringing business people and academics together, and other pre- or post-convention sessions to stimulate thinking about writing problems outside the university.

2. Addressing major research questions in the fields of business and technical writing and compiling bibliographies and syntheses of current research in the area.

3. Fostering consulting activities and devoting more CCCC sessions and publications to the work of the professional writing consultant.

4. A closer examination of real-world writing needs and of the new ways for college writing courses to meet those needs.